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SUBJECT: WHY THERE IS NO NIGERIAN CHRISTIAN SOCIO-POLITICAL
MOVEMENT

REF: A. 07 ABUJA 1442

[1](#)B. 07 ABUJA 1531

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Heather Merritt for reasons 1
.4. (b & d).

1 (C) SUMMARY: In a country where religion permeates every aspect of life, from education to the naming of the corner kiosk, from state financing for religious pilgrimages to rioting with religious overtones, one might expect to see Nigeria's 70 million Christians forming political parties or creating voting blocs with agendas explicitly informed by, and attempting to promote, their religious conviction and observance. Instead, Nigerian politics are remarkable for just the opposite -- there is little organized serious engagement in the public sphere by Nigerian Christians, acting with a self-proclaimed Christian agenda. On May 9, Poloff met in Kaduna with a group of 20 pastors from a variety of denominations to discuss their views on politics, interreligious relations, and the role of the Christian church in Nigerian society. They claimed Nigeria's Christians are too persecuted (at least in the North), overstretched, and/or divided to create a specifically Christian identity in politics. Any Christian political development appears to be years away. They also hinted that the next sectarian crisis in Kaduna could be as bad or worse than previous ones, saying that "both cheeks had been slapped" repeatedly, and that willingness to seek a middle ground with Kaduna's Muslims is eroding among many local Christians. END SUMMARY.

NO VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

[1](#)2. (SBU) Poloff traveled to the north-central state of Kaduna for a May 9 meeting with around 20 Anglican, Pentecostal, Baptist, and independent pastors. In a wide-ranging discussion on the challenges and problems facing the Christian church in Nigeria generally and Kaduna specifically, there was surprisingly broad consensus on the issues raised by Poloff during the three hour meeting. Responding to inquiries about the present and future engagement of Christians in the public arena, the pastors said that, given the current state of affairs within Nigerian Christianity, no national "prophetic voice" (i.e. the role of the church as a critic of and change agent for a society) would be heard for some time. They explained that bad

theology, internal divisions, overtaxed resources, and "constant harassment" in the North by Muslims had created a morass from which Nigerian churches would not escape for a long time. And while some Christians have dived into politics headfirst, most others regard them as ethically compromised, with such spiritual and moral degradation inevitable through any contact at all with Nigerian politics.

As an example they cited former President Obasanjo, a self-identified born-again Christian who they say became corrupted during his eight years in office by the vast amounts of power he wielded.

THEOLOGY, AND CULTURE, MATTER

¶3. (SBU) Repeating a familiar criticism of Nigerian Christianity, that it is "a mile wide and an inch deep," forum participants first blamed Christian inaction and political lethargy on the rapid spread of Christianity in recent decades, fueled largely by Pentecostal pastors who preach an individualistic theology that emphasizes the redemption of the individual at the expense of the goal of transforming society. The result, they say, is thousands of churches with millions of members that replicate Nigeria's worst cultural stereotypes, including tribalism, sycophancy towards their leaders, and a willingness to cut ethical corners for short-term gain. While churches that preach the "prosperity gospel" (i.e. material wealth is the most reliable evidence of God's blessing; therefore one needs to work hard, budget expenses, and tithe) often markedly help

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improve the quality of members' lives, they also preclude any sense of a greater Christian social mission by making religion a self-centered exercise designed to appeal to the desperate masses.

¶4. (SBU) The pastors also cited divisions within Nigerian Christianity as barriers to the creation of a Christian socio-political movement -- not just the familiar denominational ones, but a North-South divide born out of the vastly different experiences Christians have in the two halves of the country. Southern Christians, they said, who mostly live in majority Christian communities, have no idea what kind of pressure their Northern brethren live under, not only as minorities in a predominately Muslim region, but as the victims of persecution, harassment, and systems designed to marginalize non-Muslims. The pastors explained that every aspect of the practice of their faith in the North is informed by the Islamic milieu, including how/where/if churches are built, evangelism, social welfare programs, and preaching. This alleged lack of Southern appreciation and sympathy for Northern suffering creates a bitterness that is difficult to surmount. (Note: In a separate May 14 meeting with Poloff, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Nigeria John Onaiyekan described Northern Christians as in "double jeopardy," persecuted in the North but considered Northerners, and therefore foreigners, by Southern Christians. End note.)

MORE TROUBLE BREWING

¶5. (SBU) Sectarian strife also affects Christian unity by leaving many Northern Christian communities too fearful and defensive to organize politically, the pastors claim. While some interfaith reconciliation programs in Kaduna, such as Bridge Builders and the Interfaith Mediation Center (reftel A) have made some progress, the pastors see little evidence of an on-the-ground detente. Though most objective observers believe that Nigeria's communal conflicts have a political/economic/ethnic root, to a man the group (which included some converts from Islam) insisted to Poloff that there is an "Islamic agenda for the domination of Nigeria"

that is relentless, well-funded, and unhesitatingly violent when necessary. Citing the riots over the 2000 Sharia implementation, the 2002 Miss World contest, and the 2006 Danish cartoons, the pastors asserted that many Muslims are looking for any opportunity to renew violence. They also claimed that the Nigerian constitution helps promote religious crises by ostensibly creating a neutral state but at the same time permitting the de facto enshrinement of Islam as a state religion in much of Nigeria. The pastors complained about government actions that they claim favored Muslims, including the implementation of sharia law, allegedly unequal provision of/access to state services and jobs, and secret payments of millions of dollars of membership fees to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). (Comment: The GON has been reticent to clarify its exact status in the OIC, and Nigerian critics, both Christian and Muslim, have claimed that there has never been adequate public debate over whether Nigeria should belong to the OIC, and what such membership would mean. In April 2008 word about Obasanjo's alleged 2007 payment of membership arrears dating back to 1986 leaked out in the press, provoking outrage in some Christian circles, but Post has been unable to confirm the veracity of this report, or the amount paid, if any. Yar'Adua's attendance of the OIC's March summit in Dakar, however, would seem to put to rest any debate over whether or not Nigeria is a full member. End comment.)

16. (SBU) COMMENT: The pastors may not have been Nigerian Christianity's most articulate spokesmen, but in Poloff's experience they reflect the views of most Northern Christians. In an in-depth discussion mostly focused on politics and society, conducted over a three hour period, not a single pastor ever made reference to the government as a possible source of solutions or aid in solving Nigeria's deeply entrenched, long-term problems. Indeed, they cited the government's corruption and incompetence, and the

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resultant strain on their own financial and educational resources, as yet one more reason why Nigeria's Christians are unable to confront Nigeria's social and political challenges in an organized, unified manner. Given the long list of obstacles they say they have been so far unable to surmount, it appears that no Nigerian version of America's Religious Right, or even a Martin Luther King-type of reformer informed by Christian convictions, will emerge any time soon.

17. (C) COMMENT CON'T: A menacing subtext was clear in the pastors' complaints about religious strife: willingness to seek compromise and peace with their Muslim neighbors is eroding. Indeed, such a willingness may be waning nationwide. Pronouncements by mainstream leaders in the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) are alarming, including the threat to respond "appropriately" after the murders of three clergymen in Oyo State in April 2008. Anglican Archbishop Peter Akinola (who warned Muslims that "they do not have a monopoly on violence") may have been deposed last year from the presidency of the CAN, but his failure to be re-elected had more to do with his personal politics and interdenominational relations than his famously confrontational attitude towards Muslims (reftel B). Indeed, despite his abrasive approach toward interfaith relations, many CAN members thought he responded too weakly to violence against Christians. Muslim-Christian tension will certainly continue, and we may see a more "muscular" Christian response, perhaps tacitly sanctioned by CAN and better organized, armed, and quicker to respond to provocation than in the past. Archbishop Onaiyekan cautiously confirmed as much, noting that some Christians indeed were saying, "enough is enough." Though interfaith reconciliation programs, some of which are supported by the USG, are important and have some positive impact, post believes the potential for episodic interreligious violence in Nigeria remains and we will continue to monitor developments. END COMMENT.

